

Third-Last Sunday in the Church Year, A²D 2010

Matthew 24:15-28

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Since Pentecost, we have been counting up, celebrating the growth of Christ's Church, counting ourselves privileged to be among the Lord's elect, those whom He gathers around the beacons of His Word and Sacraments. Now we turn to counting down; no longer looking backward at Pentecost as the birthday of the Church, we turn our eyes forward to the end of the Church Year. We remind ourselves that every day is one closer to the Day, the Day of Christ's return. This little season, these three weeks, of pre-Advent is to prepare you for that season of repentance and preparation. Always getting ready is the way of the Church. Even if Advent never comes, if the season of Advent is prevented by the Second Advent of Christ, these weeks that count down to the end are still to prepare you for that Day.

2 The mood at the end of the Church Year is somber. This is backwards from Lent. Lent moves from lighter to darker, from Lenten-lite of the Gesima Sundays to the somber, quiet, reserved last two weeks called Passiontide. Everything gets deeper and darker in Lent until Good Friday and then joy explodes on Easter. But the move through Advent is the opposite. We start with the strongest warnings in the weeks before Advent, and Advent itself builds in anticipation until at the very end your prayer is so sharply focused on the Return of Christ that nearly all you can pray is "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

3 But first, a warning: Jerusalem will be destroyed. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus warned against the coming Abomination of Desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel. What's that? The desolation of the holy place of God, the temple in Jerusalem, by bringing in an abominable false god. The historian of 1 Maccabees describes the actions of the Greek emperor Antiochus Epiphanes who erected a statue of Zeus and sacrificed pigs in the temple in 167 B.C. Then, in 40 A.D., Caius Caligula, the Roman Emperor, planned to put a statue of himself in the temple. Finally, in 70 A.D., some forty years after Jesus' warning, the Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem, burning it—and the temple—to the ground. Jesus warned of the coming sacrilege and told His disciples to flee to the mountains rather than endure the desecration of the temple and the ensuing persecution.

4 Jerusalem, even Jerusalem, even the City of God, the city where He built His temple, the city where He housed His Ark of the Covenant, the city at the heart of the Promised Land, the city which God defended with angelic armies, the city with the only place for offering sacrifices, the city where God placed His name, the city God loved, even Jerusalem would be destroyed. If God is not wistfully nostalgic enough to preserve Jerusalem, what hope do you have? If God's long-standing relationship with Jerusalem was not enough to stave off His wrath and its destruction, what hope is there for you? Evidently, you cannot rely on history as the source of your comfort. Just because your parents or grandparents were Christian does not guarantee God's favor toward you. Merely being a member of a congregation is not enough to make you a part of Christ's Church. God is no respecter of persons. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

5 The problem runs deep in Israel's history. When Moses seemed a long time in returning, they sought Aaron's help in making a suitable replacement for the God to whom Moses had ascended on Mt. Sinai. The worship, the liturgy was the same. They offered sacrifices and burnt offerings, as before, but they replaced the God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt with the god of their own creation. Even though the ritual was correct, the worship was idolatrous. So it is that every sin is ultimately a breaking of the first commandment. It's relatively easy to identify your sins. It's far more difficult to expose the idolatry behind those sins, the gods substituted for the One Triune God. But to let Moses grind those gods to dust and scatter them over the water and to drink the cup of repentance he gives

you is to let the Law of God do its work. In false gods, there is no comfort. In being your own god, there is no hope.

6 Now One greater than Moses has come. Doubtless, the Abomination of Desolation, of which Jesus warned, struck great fear into the hearts of the disciples. Seeing the temple of God desecrated with false worship was offensive. Seeing the unholy brought into the holy would have made them recoil in horror. But then the opposite happened. The temple was destroyed, not by bringing something unholy into it, but by bringing the Temple of God out to the unholy place. The very Son of God who called His own Body the true Temple, was brought out to the place of death, the Place of the Skull. The death of God on the cross was the desolation of the abomination of death. The Holy One was brought to the profane place, the tree of the curse, and by His death made it holy. By His death, He has undone death.

7 When you see the signs all around of the coming Day of Christ's return, flee to the mountains. Leave Jerusalem; flee from your hope in your own righteousness, your claim to God by birth or bloodright, your hope in being a good enough person. Flee Jerusalem and head to the mountains, but not just any mountains. Flee to Mts. Calvary and Zion. Flee to Mt. Calvary, where the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world dealt with the world's sin. There, God spent His wrath against sinners on the One who took the world's sins. Flee in repentance from any confidence in your own righteousness to complete trust in Jesus for forgiveness. For those in Jesus, there is no fear of God's wrath. For those who are in Christ, no fear of His return exists. For those who are in Christ, those who in the hearing of the Word receive His gift of faith, that Day is the long-hoped-for end to this life's suffering.

8 From there, flee to Mt. Zion, the place where God still dwells with His people. Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple razed, but God still dwells with the New Israel, His Church, at Mt. Zion, in His holy Word and Sacraments. Here is where He reveals Himself: God is revealed, not yet in glory, but in suffering and death, on the cross. He is revealed in weakness and water; He is delivered in wine and wafer. For now, until the day when the Lord gathers you to Himself through death or through His return, God remains hidden in the places where He has promised to be for you. When anything else beckons for your attention, flee to Mt. Zion, the dwelling place of God, hidden here in Christ's Word and Sacraments, His Word of Absolution and His holy Supper. These are the beacons which God shines to gather His elect to Himself. The people of God gather around the gifts of God to await the Day of God's return. For those fed with the Lord's Holy Word and Sacraments, there is no fear of destruction. Though the mountains tremble and the earth give way, the Word of the Lord endures forever. If you live in this Word, if you feast on the Word of God at His Supper, so will you endure forever.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer